

## SPC 25th Anniversary Edition

### DAN MACDONALD

#### A message from the President

Several years ago I heard of some organization here in Saskatchewan that actually helped playwrights work on their plays by giving them feedback and even workshops. At the time it was affiliated with the SWG and being a member of the SWG, I was able to keep up what was happening with this little organization and the work of its members. I kept my distance though, I was much too intimidated to actually submit a play. I even remember being in Saskatoon once and being too shy to drop by the office to get more information on this little organization. Each year I would attend Spring Festival and quietly dream of a day when, I too, might have a play workshopped there.

Many years, a few plays and several festivals later I find myself as the outgoing president of the SPC. My time as a member and board member has been incredibly fulfilling and a lot of fun. In its 25 years the

Playwrights Centre has grown into an organization that is quite often the envy of other regional play development centres across Canada. Our dedication to the play and playwright, and our member oriented grassroots leadership, has ensured that all our decisions are made with an eye to what is best for the playwright and her or his work. This has occurred, because from its early days 25 years ago, right up to today, we have never lost sight of what it is that makes us unique and vibrant: an unwavering faith that what we do is important and valuable.

Somehow in these strange and often terrible days that the world is seeing, and with our own government making cuts to areas that they deem extraneous or wasteful, more than ever writing a play seems like a really good idea.

Dan Macdonald



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## REX DEVERELL

### SPC - the early years

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It was a dark and stormy night (I know, but it *was* a dark and stormy night!) in 1982. A bunch of us playwrights gathered in a rec room somewhere in the Regina Crescents. I can't remember whose house – maybe Connie Gault's - but it was definitely in the basement. We had nowhere to go but up.

Connie Gault, Mossie Hancock, Marie Mendenhall, Ken Mitchell, Barbara Sapergia, Geoff Ursell, Dianne Warren, and yours truly were there. Ken had called us together but he blamed it all on Marie. She had been off in the U.S. studying dramaturgy and returned to insist that Saskatchewan needed a play development centre. She was right.

In those days one could count the number of Saskatchewan playwrights who had had professional theatre productions on the fingers of one hand. It seemed strange – given the plethora of poets and authors of assorted prose. The conundrum was (and still is) how to develop a body of viable local plays if theatres were refusing to produce local plays. And the reason the theatres gave was that there was no body of viable local plays. It was a catch 22.

I should point out that there were successful sask. plays previous to this – Ken and I had a few and the collective, “Paper Wheat” was a national success. But most writers were not thinking stage plays. After all, who would read them? Who would perform them? Who would pay attention?

One of the many things I like about Saskatchewan is that things start up easily (except maybe car engines in January). After all, a quorum is easy to assemble when it only takes three or four people, and there is a sense that by getting together, most problems can be solved. So that night we got together to address the problem. Seemed obvious. We had to gather the community, find the writers, workshop plays to the point of stage-worthiness, and offer them to those recalcitrant, safe playing, benighted artistic directors.

We sought some start up money from the Writers Guild. We set a date for a founding meeting in

Saskatoon and we sent out the word and gathered in scripts. There weren't a huge number that first year but there were some – enough for a public reading. We invited the Artistic Directors. We couldn't pay a staff or a development guru – so we decided to vet the scripts ourselves: it was a kind of triage process. But no playwright was to be judged hopeless, no matter how dim the prognosis seemed to be. Some plays and playwrights we took under our wing and mentored for a few weeks (I learned the pitfalls of mentoring the hard way. Some writers want to hear only that their work needs no improvement). Most plays were given a cold reading and some were deemed ready for a public showcase.

All of this we designed from whole cloth. There were a few development centres already in existence at the New Play Centre in Vancouver and the Colony at Banff. Manitoba was already functioning – I had spent a couple of weeks as a guest dramaturg there – but I think we really were designing an organization to meet specific Saskatchewan concerns.

I was in an odd position, myself. As playwright in residence at the Globe Theatre I worried that I might be part of the problem, rather than the solution. I didn't have a play-reading or gate-keeping function at the Globe but I guess I represented a commitment, on the part of the Artistic Directors, Ken and Sue Kramer, to invest the resources of the theatre in a single writer over a long period. It worked well for me and I think for the Globe, however, though the theatre produced other plays with Saskatchewan relevance – Ken Mitchell, Len Peterson, and W.O. Mitchell, for example – I still felt a certain awkwardness about how much space my own plays took up in the community. I had been bitten by the Saskatchewan bug – the building of co-operative communities. So that is why I was in that rec room on that rainy night.

It hadn't taken long to decide on an organization – actually it took longer to decide what to call it. “Saskatchewan Centre for Playwriting?” “Saskatchewan New Play Centre?” “Saskatchewan Playwrights Workshop?” What about the “Saskatchewan

Playwrights Centre?” I think it was Geoff (or Barb) who pointed out that the acronym would be S.P.C – we all fell about laughing. Perfect!

Each year, the number of submissions grew. The Spring showcase became a major arts event. Of course the other SPC in the province is the Sask. Power Corporation. But I’ve watched our SPC become a Power Corporation in its own right, electrifying the province and often the rest of the country with its creative output. SPC became what we hoped for that night – and more.

Sooner than we had expected, Saskatchewan playwrights stopped thinking it was useless to write plays. They knew who would read them, who would perform them. They knew attention would be paid.

What we didn’t predict, though, is that the battle for that attention would have to be fought over and over again.

**Rex Deverell**

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## **CONNIE GAULT**

### **SPC - the middle years**

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Warning. This all happened long ago and my memory is as holey as an old pair of gotch. For everything I’ve forgotten or misremembered, forgive me.

Dianne Warren introduced me to the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre and I think the first play I saw workshopped was hers. That was 1983. I attended a few Spring Festivals after that, intrigued by the process and the product – I’ve always loved the seat-of-the-pants informality of staged readings. In 1986 I had a story I wanted to expand into a novel and Dianne persuaded me to turn it into a play. She did that by telling me it would be easy. All I had to do was write a script. (!) Then, if “they” selected it for a workshop, they’d find actors and a director for me.

Who were “they”? In 1986 and for a long time afterwards the SPC was run by a hands-on, arms-length committee of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild. Somewhere along the way they hired Kate and Stephen Gregg of Wheatland Theatre to run the Spring Festivals. I believe in those days the board chose the plays for the festival. I don’t remember much about my first workshop except it all happened fast, my friends didn’t like the new ending I’d tacked on during the workshop, and I was hooked. Pam Bustin read the lead. I wish I could name all the actors we worked with during this time, but I know I’d miss some. Let me just thank them for their invaluable contributions to the organization and each of us playwrights.

It wasn’t long before I was sitting on the board. I loved being part of this organization. The SPC has only one purpose: to help playwrights with their plays. That was always clear to those of us involved in the middle years – or so it seems to me now. The meetings were fun. We had a common enemy (you guessed it): theatres who wouldn’t produce our plays.

About 1987 I wrote a letter to the editor of the Leader-Post taking Ken Kramer of Globe Theatre to task for a comment he’d made in an article. He’d said it was difficult to find Canadian plays that would appeal to his audience. A few things resulted from that letter. He responded in the paper, explaining his position. Barbara Sapergia wrote a letter to the editor giving the playwrights centre’s stance. And Ken Kramer attended the Spring Festival that year. Maybe it wasn’t our campaign that brought him, though it certainly got his attention. Maybe a little sugar worked better than that vinegar. We had a playwright and dramaturg from Montreal on our side, Michael Springate. He got Tom Bentley-Fisher of 25th Street Theatre to come to the Festival; maybe he convinced Ken to come as well. So we had two artistic directors watching our new plays. (Tom became a big supporter.) And that resulted in more Saskatchewan plays being produced in Saskatchewan theatres.

Michael Springate brought a new perspective to SPC. Previously playwrights from out of province had been invited to take part in Spring Festivals but they’d acted

mostly as writers' advocates during the workshop process. Michael, working at Playwrights Workshop Montreal, had developed a strategy of questioning the text as well as one of promoting playwrights. We on the board liked both. From that time on we invited dramaturgs to work with writers on their new plays and we decided to hire a staff person to create a year-long development program and to promote our work to theatres in a professional manner. We were most fortunate in finding Marina Endicott. I remember her first Spring Festival. She was a little nervous, I think; it was the hottest day the world had known to that point of time and we were all sweltering in the dark old arena theatre in the dark old U of R drama building. She stood in front of us all and was – as she would continue to be throughout her tenure – gracious, intelligent, knowledgeable, perceptive and fun. Marina was a wonderful co-ordinator as well as a gifted dramaturg and worked miracles on a cat food budget. Whether it was a certain director or really good party snacks, she found a way to provide. But she remembers six or seven actors sleeping in every cranny of her hotel room. And pages of scripts falling to the floor in slow motion.

Success (more members, more plays being written, some being produced!) meant too much work for one person. We made another brilliant move and hired Rod McPherson – and a more helpful administrator we couldn't have imagined. He always made me feel calm. Marina and Rod pulled off one of the best conferences I've ever attended: The PlayWorks conference of 1989, which showcased plays from the three prairie provinces, dazzled participants with speeches and panels and put our little SPC on the map.

1991 was a special year: the first year D.D. Kugler came to Regina as Festival dramaturg. Since then he's seldom missed a year, whether he's come as a dramaturg, a director or as audience. And how lucky we are. Across Canada and internationally, he's been a sure supporter of the organization and its members. More importantly, many of us have benefitted from his challenging intellect and his wisdom. I've never understood the generosity of dramaturgs, how a person can work with such commitment on someone else's writing, and Don Kugler is the most generous of dramaturgs.

About this time Marina Endicott had to leave us and we on the board were relieved to find Patti Shedden to

fill the job. Patti brought us her own brand of capable intelligence and vitality and a real passion for theatre. We were fortunate again – another dedicated dramaturg to run the organization and lead the push toward getting our playwrights better known. About 1996, Margaret Kyle took over as administrator from Rod MacPherson. She brought such a friendly atmosphere to the office it was always a pure pleasure to deal with her. Later, when Patti left SPC, our luck stayed good and Angus Ferguson became our dramaturg.

And who were "we"? I can't begin to name us; I'd leave at least half of us out. I know we were often earnest, even fanatical, about the decisions we were making, about the politics of theatre and especially about our philosophies of playwrighting and dramaturgy. But I can't remember any of the motions we passed or the debates. Well, maybe I slightly recall the AGM when the board was accused of elitism. Kay Nouch spearheaded that campaign for accountability. (If we hadn't already instituted an outside reader for the Festival by then, we soon did.) I also sort of recall a rather heated exchange with Rod McIntyre who thought SPC should work with filmscript writers as well as playwrights. Maybe he was right, though I still disagree. But all that's hazy. Here's what's clear: Kay Nouch dragging her oxygen tank to the aisle the better to blast us, Harry Rintoul (from Manitoba) going outside to vomit before his play was read, Mansel Robinson grinning behind the bar, Kugler wrinkling his brow and rubbing his hands all over his head in consternation, eight or ten of us sitting around a table in a restaurant in Davidson watching Geoff Ursell trying to catch a fly with a kleenex, hearing Mary Love laugh really loud when I (seriously) said it would be a bad idea to kick a gift horse in the mouth (wonder who the gift horse was?), seeing Eugene Stickland swaying in his chair, his eyes at half-mast. I guess aside from the fly-catching and malapropism we were boring that day. But they were mostly good days, good years. Or so it seems to me.

**Connie Gault**

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**Looking Back - Dreaming Forward: the dramaturg reminisces**

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Twenty-five years, that's one quarter of a century, a whole generation. If we were a car we would just have moved from classic to antique. It pretty much spans my entire career in theatre, which, come to think of it, also makes me feel suddenly old. I can't say I was around at the beginning of the SPC twenty-five years ago, but I suddenly realize I have been around in one way or another for about half of it.

I think my first awareness of the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre might have come in the late '80s when I met Marina Endicott at the Edmonton Fringe Festival and she introduced herself as the dramaturg for the SPC. But that was just a teaser, a hint of exotic things happening across the border in Saskatchewan. It was another few years before the achievements of this playwriting engine that could become tangible to me. The next contact, although equally tangential, proved far more beneficial. It was 1993, I had just taken over Theatre Network in Edmonton, I was in a mad panic to put together my first season, and I bumped into Roy Surette, Artistic Director of The Belfry Theatre. He had just come back from this festival of plays in Saskatchewan and suggested that I look at a couple of plays by this exciting new playwright Mansel Robinson. I got on the phone the next day and started an artistic relationship with Mansel that continues until this day. I keep on asking Roy back to the festival and sadly to date his schedule has not allowed it.

It was not until the end of that year however that I had my first full taste of what SPC had to offer, Spring Festival in the flesh. Maybe it was because I had premiered one of Mansel's plays, **Collateral Damage**, maybe it was because I was running Theatre Network, a company devoted to the production of new work (it certainly wasn't because we'd ever met) but suddenly Patti Shedden was on the phone, introducing herself as the dramaturg for the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre and inviting me to come and direct a workshop for that year's Spring Festival of Plays. Well, I thought, if this festival is filled with more Mansel Robinsons I can't wait. I was not disappointed. I was whisked off the plane and introduced to another brand new playwright, Pam Bustin, and the next thing I knew we were sitting

at an outdoor patio on a beautiful spring day in Regina, nibbling away at our sandwiches and talking about her first play **Saddles in the Rain**. And not only that, but all these other new plays were being worked on by a whole bunch of other cool people swarming around just across the street.

I was sold and the following year I came back on my own steam just to see what was happening. I camped out in the hotel (yes, we got to stay in hotels back then) and went new play shopping. Over the following six years I think I only missed one festival. I came twice just to check out what was happening and the rest of the time I got to work on more new plays. Over the years I was able to work on projects by Mansel, Don Kerr, Donald B Campbell, and Barbara Sapergia and I was able to see work by a host of others.

But there was still one more step to go. When I am asked by people how I ended up as dramaturg for the SPC in 2001 when Angus Ferguson stepped down to run his own company in Meacham, I liken it to the Remington Shaver ad, 'I liked it so much I bought the company.' When the ad for the job of SPC dramaturg suddenly came across my computer I could not resist. I have to say it was the remarkable open-mindedness of the hiring committee that they were willing to consider the idea of me living my double life between Saskatchewan and Alberta. I never expected them to go for it. I drove to Saskatchewan for the interview more because I loved the idea of the organization than out of any real expectation I would be able to take the job. And then, when they were willing to work with my eccentric living circumstances, I thought, 'well maybe this will work for a couple of years.' And that was seven years ago.

It has been a great seven years. I was very fortunate to be able to do my job at a time when the funding agencies were smiling down upon us allowing substantial room for exciting growth without the usual financial headaches that go with it. I've worked with a myriad of wonderful board members and two fabulous 'partners in crime,' administrators Margaret Kyle and Sheila Angelstad. But mostly I have loved being able to build

on the remarkable foundations set down by all that went before me.

So what makes SPC so special? Most important is that it is run by all of you, the playwrights that it also serves. There are very few arts organizations where the board is made up of the artists for whom the organization exists. We are lucky in Saskatchewan that the law allows this. It makes for an organization that is amazingly rooted and also for one that is a joy to work for. I have also loved that I am not the artistic director and that the decision making responsibility lies where it should, with the playwrights.

We are also blessed to live in a province where the government believes not only in the arts but in the professional arts. As much as we may kvetch at times about the shortcomings of government support, believe me it is much worse elsewhere. Remember, I still live in Alberta. And I think it is all of these things that have created in Saskatchewan a playwriting community second to none. We are the living example of what twenty-five years of hard work and investment can create in a province smack in the middle of our empty continent.

I think the other key to the success of the SPC is that it put down solid roots at the beginning and then has continued to refine and refine and refine. It has always

resisted the temptation to ignore the lessons of its past while at the same time never being complacent and ignoring the possibility for improvement. It is a great example of the strengths of an evolutionary organization. This combination has taught us to do what we do very, very well, and yet we still constantly re-evaluate and find ways to improve and move forward.

So now it is time to move forward again. For me this twenty-fifth year will be my last with the SPC, at least as its dramaturg. After seven years, at this job I took for two years, it is time to pass the baton to the next dramaturg. I hope that I will be passing on as firm a structure as I inherited. I look forward to seeing what you all do next. I don't know what the founders expected twenty-five years ago. I hope what we have all created resembles in some way the essence of their vision. And I hope twenty-five years from now, when the dramaturg of that day looks back, that they are working for an organization still soundly rooted in all the work that has gone on before and also fabulously better than anything we dream of today.

On to the next quarter century!

**Ben Henderson**



*SPC through the years - our picture choices are limited by our archives*



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## SPC

### Annual General Meeting 2006

Please attend the SPC's AGM on Sunday,  
November 5, 2006 at 1:00p.m. at the Riddell  
Centre, Room 077 (basement)  
University of Regina.

RSVP to Sheila at [sk.playwrights@sasktel.net](mailto:sk.playwrights@sasktel.net)

## REMINDER

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